

Minutes of the West Mercia Police and Crime Panel

Wyre Forest District Council, Wyre Forest House, Finepoint

Way, Kidderminster DY11 7WF

Friday, 17 November 2023, 2.00 pm

Present:

Cllr Barry Durkin (Chairman), Cllr Rob Adams (Vice Chairman),
Cllr Roger Evans, Cllr Liz Harvey, Cllr Helen Jones, Cllr Nigel Lumby,
Cllr Tracey Onslow, Cllr Tony Parsons, Cllr Tom Piotrowski,
Cllr James Stanley, Mrs C Clive and Ms B McDowall

Also attended:

John Champion, West Mercia Police & Crime Commissioner
Acting Chief Constable Alex Murray, West Mercia Police
Gareth Boulton, Chief Executive, Office of the West Mercia Police & Crime
Commissioner
Andrew Boote, Head of Service for Safer Communities (Public Health)
Samantha Morris, Interim Democratic Governance and Scrutiny Manager
Alyson Grice, Overview and Scrutiny Officer

Available Papers

The members had before them:

- A. The Agenda papers (previously circulated);
- B. The Minutes of the Meeting held on 30 October 2023 (previously circulated).

(A copy of document A will be attached to the signed Minutes).

494 Welcome and Introductions

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting.

495 Named Substitutes

There were no named substitutes.

496 Apologies and Declarations of Interest

West Mercia Police and Crime Panel Friday, 17 November 2023
Date of Issue: 02 January 2024

Apologies were received from Councillors Martin Allen, Joanne Beecham, Kelly Middleton, Richard Overton and Vivienne Parry.

Councillor Tracey Onslow declared an interest in that she had previously served as Deputy Police and Crime Commissioner.

497 Public Participation

None.

498 Police & Crime Plan Activity and Performance Monitoring Report

The Panel received an update on the activity undertaken by the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) in support of his Safer West Mercia Plan and an update on police performance.

The PCC introduced the Panel to the Acting Chief Constable (ACC) who was attending to support the PCC in relation to operational detail. He went on to highlight the following main points:

- The PCC had been successful in a funding bid to NHS England & Improvement for £650k to deliver a Complex Care Pathfinder for victims of sexual violence. The service was likely to start in the new year and would provide a step change in the support provided to victims and survivors.
- As part of the fifth round of the Government's Safer Streets initiative, the PCC had successfully bid for just under £1 million to fund a range of projects to tackle violence against women and girls (VAWG), anti-social behaviour (ASB) and Neighbourhood Crime.
- Members were reminded about the PCC's £150k Road Safety West Mercia grant round which had invited applications to fund safety interventions that would reduce harm on West Mercia's roads. The deadline had now passed and the PCC informed the Panel that he was not confident that he had received a good range of applications. He went on to ask Members from highways authorities (ie Unitary Councils and Worcestershire County Council) raised the issue in their authorities to encourage engagement.
- With reference to criminal justice, the PCC reported that he was not confident that the Local Criminal Justice Board and the Victims' Board were working effectively. He would give further details in future performance reports.
- With reference to Reforming West Mercia and the number of police officers, the uplift target had been achieved in September which enabled the full establishment of the five Neighbourhood Crime Fighting Teams. Ten Community Safety Engagement officers were also now in post.
- Challenges remained in relation to the Firearms Licensing Unit (FLU) and waiting times for new certificates which had not improved as

anticipated. The significantly higher number of license holders in West Mercia meant a larger number of renewals, resulting in unreasonably long delays for new licence applications. It was important to note that the focus on public safety was non-negotiable. The FLU's capacity would be significantly expanded and it was anticipated that this would lead to improved wait times in the next 2 quarters. There would also be further investment in 2024/25.

Members of the Panel were invited to ask questions and the following main points were raised:

- A Member of the Panel welcomed the additional resources for work relating to domestic abuse and was pleased to see that the DRIVE programme was now working with 43 of the highest risk perpetrators. The PCC reminded the Panel that Worcestershire had led the way in relation to DRIVE, and the programme now operated across the West Mercia region.
- In relation to court backlogs, the PCC reported that the criminal justice system was hesitant about sharing data on this and, as a result, the public was not well informed. He gave the example of sexual assault which may take three years to get to court. In relation to court capacity, the situation was improving, although lack of judicial capacity remained a concern.
- A Member asked a question about the increase in robberies in Shropshire, providing a local example, and asked what reassurance the PCC could provide to local residents. The recently published findings of His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) Victim Service Assessment was also referred to, in that it had highlighted the need to improve how the force responded to the public and how effectively crimes were supervised. In response the PCC reminded the Panel about the strategic investment in investigations teams. The ACC informed Members that across the whole of West Mercia the number of robberies was down, although acknowledged that the figure for Shropshire was concerning. In relation to the Victim Service Assessment, the ACC acknowledged that the force had not seen the progress they had hoped for but an action plan was in place and recent case sampling had suggested significant improvement.
- In response to the suggestion that residents needed reassurance that resources were being provided for their local area, the PCC referred to the Policing Protocol and acknowledged that the Chief Constable needed to do more to explain what was being done, including via the Neighbourhood Matters messaging service. The Panel was reminded that local neighbourhood teams were part of a much wider system and were not the only resource.
- In relation to road safety, the PCC confirmed that funding for certain schemes was via the Commissioners' Community Fund, as it was felt best to have this devolved to the person who had operational control for the district.

- The Panel was informed that there had been additional investment in the vehicle fleet, including a significant number of new vehicles. There was also a need to see efficiency gains from the existing fleet.
- The Chairman noted that the contract for the Independent Sexual Violence Advisors (ISVA) and Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) Service had entered its final year and asked what lessons had been learnt in relation to this service. In response the PCC confirmed that the service had seen a high level of demand. The timeliness and flexibility of the service was important as was ensuring that it was an inclusive service. It was also important to work with partners to ensure spend was maximised and to avoid duplication of effort. He noted that sexual violence was not talked about enough in society and felt this was a good opportunity to focus on this area and take stock. The PCC went on to highlight the work of the OPCC's commissioning team which worked together with health colleagues and now included a specialist in sexual violence.
- In response to a Panel Member's question about Ministry of Justice (MoJ) funding in relation to Victim Support Services (including the West Mercia Rape and Sexual Abuse Support Centre), the PCC confirmed that he did not understand the rationale behind funding allocations. He had approached the MoJ for clarification but had not received a satisfactory answer. He reminded the Panel that the MoJ was accountable to government and not to the PCC. The Chairman asked that any further clarification received be shared with the Panel.
- It was confirmed that increased engagement with the public had meant an increase in the level of OPCC casework with the specific staff resource having been reviewed accordingly. It was right that the PCC had a role in this area but it was important that policing work remained with the police. The PCC confirmed that he took a personal interest in casework sometimes acting as an advocate for the public and he also had a role in the review of complaints against the police.
- In relation to the Q2 performance report, a Panel Member expressed surprise that West Mercia had been identified as having the fifth highest rate of homicide per capita in the country and asked about the context for this. The ACC suggested that this was not actually the case and informed the Panel that, when a death was recorded and categorised, WM Police had taken a very risk averse view on whether a homicide had taken place. He reassured the Panel that the number of murders in the year to date was considerably fewer than in the previous year.
- The Panel Member went on to ask about the 5% increase in levels of stalking and harassment which, it was stated, was primarily due to a 41% increase in these crimes in Herefordshire. The ACC reminded the Panel that harassment was a subjective offence and was a relatively new crime which was recorded in line with rigorous crime recording procedures. The rise in levels of stalking were more concerning as this was a significant predictor offence. The ACC reassured Members that he had not seen anything of particular concern in Herefordshire in relation to stalking.
- The PCC reminded the Panel that he held a dedicated assurance and accountability session each quarter to look at performance information.

Analysis would then drive commissioning intent to look at what more could be done.

- A further question was asked about levels of public confidence which were below target and on a declining trend. In relation to police visibility, the PCC agreed that the situation was not acceptable. On behalf of the public, the PCC had made available 500 additional police officers but levels of visibility had declined. Public confidence was central to the Police and Crime Plan and the current situation was not good enough. The force was now focusing on ensuring that Safer Neighbourhood Teams spent more time in the community and it was expected that figures would improve as a result. If this was not the case, the PCC would request a change in approach from the police.
- Surprise was expressed about the reported concerns around levels of crime and public confidence in Pershore with a Member suggesting that Pershore was one of the safest towns in Worcestershire. The PCC agreed and suggested that this demonstrated that the system of reassurance to local residents had not been working correctly. He went on to inform the Panel that this situation had now been rectified.
- A Panel Member asked whether information relating to the disposal of assets could be shared with the Panel including where the money received would be used. It was agreed that the Chief Executive of the OPCC would take this request forward following the meeting.
- A Member expressed concern that parish councils were not currently able to see local crime data at a parish level. The ACC recognised the issue and shared the Panel's frustration that this was not yet possible. However, he reminded the Panel that Power BI would be rolled out over the next year with the aim of improving access to performance data. In the meantime, the local Safer Neighbourhood Team would have information on all crimes that had taken place in the locality. In addition, the PCC reminded the Panel that the Local Policing Charter meant that the Safer Neighbourhood Team should engage with each Parish Council every 3 months and he asked Members to let him know if this was not the case. It was agreed that an expanded section on the operation of the Local Policing Charter would be included for the Panel's next update. The PCC also reminded the Panel about the Neighbourhood Matters messaging system which provided updates to local residents on crimes and incidents in their local area.
- With reference to the findings of the HMICFRS Victim Service Assessment which had been published in October, a Member asked why no meaningful improvement had been made to supervision throughout an investigation. In response, the PCC referred to the time lag between when the assessment had taken place and when the report had been published. Ongoing work gave reassurance that, if the assessment took place now, the result would not be the same.
- In response to a question about poor performance in relation to call handling, the PCC agreed that the service to the public on both the 101 and 999 services had not been good enough and he reminded the Panel that he had said this previously on the public record. This was now an area of significant focus for the force in terms of technology and the organisation of how calls were answered. Although it was early

days, he was confident that the next set of figures would show some improvement.

- A Member noted that West Mercia Police was reviewing the issuing of Naloxone to front line police officers and asked about the background to this. The PCC reminded the Panel that Naloxone was a drug which countered the effects of opiate use and overdose. In West Mercia it was currently available in custody suites, although elsewhere in the country it was issued to all frontline officers. The PCC informed Members that, in reviewing the approach, he would like to receive reassurance about potential 'mission creep'. It was agreed that the outcome of this review would be reported back to the Panel at its next meeting.
- A Member referred to the national police performance statistics for stop and search and noted that in West Mercia 1.4 white people per 1000 were subject to stop and search, whereas for black residents the figure was 18 per 1000. Reassurance regarding the correct deployment of stop and search powers was requested. In response, the PCC suggested that the statistics in this area should be treated carefully, as a proportion of the black people who were stopped and searched may not be residents of West Mercia. However, he agreed with the overall contention that the black community was overly stopped and searched. The challenge for the police nationally was how to change this and to understand what was a deep-seated societal issue. In terms of action by West Mercia, the PCC reported that he had carried out assurance and accountability with a focus on diversity, equality and inclusion, provided training, and put safeguards in place including body worn video.
- The importance of statistics and performance metrics was noted and the PCC was asked when he would be able to report on the full range of performance indicators in the Safer West Mercia Plan. In response, he acknowledged that recording of statistics and how performance was measured was a perpetual problem and he was frustrated that he was not currently able to provide a full set of data. He hoped that whoever wrote the next Plan would benefit from his experience.
- With reference to call handling, the PCC acknowledged that the trend in Shropshire, where response times were falling, was not acceptable. Concern was expressed about liaison with other forces and response times in rural areas. The PCC reassured the Panel that the situation in Shropshire was a focus for the force and there were plans in place to achieve improvements.
- In response to a question about progress achieved by the Combatting Drugs Partnerships (CDPs), the PCC noted the regional nature of the partnerships (one in the north of the county and one in the south) which aimed to maximise activity. He suggested that the CDPs were not yet making the most of the benefits of partners coming together but was confident that further progress would be seen.

499 2023/24 Annual Budget Metrics Report

The Panel considered the latest update on the key performance indicators (KPIs) agreed as part of the budget setting process for 2023/24.

Members were invited to ask questions and the following main points were raised:

- With reference to reducing the carbon footprint associated with policing, a Member asked when a meaningful indicator would be available. In response, Members were informed that positive progress was being made (for example the rollout of LED lights and the electrification of vehicles) and work continued on how this progress could be quantified and what a baseline figure would look like.
- The PCC asked the Panel to note an error in the report. On page 18, the update in relation to domestic abuse should refer to a 10% reduction since April 2023 (rather than a 9% increase).
- The PCC reported that, based on Q2 figures, the current year budget was in line with expectations and was not forecast to show an overspend. The budget for 2024/25 was currently being put together and a briefing for Panel Members would be held at the beginning of December.

500 Work Programme

The Panel reviewed its work programme and the following main points were made:

- It was suggested that an update on the Criminal Justice System should be added to a future agenda.
- A visit to the West Mercia police headquarters at Hindlip Hall (including a tour of the estate) would be arranged for the new year.
- In the light of court backlogs and the delay in cases moving through the court system, the possibility of inviting a representative of the Ministry of Justice to attend a future Panel meeting was discussed. A Member suggested that the Local Criminal Justice Board would be a useful starting point as it held the courts to account and reported to the PCC.
- It was suggested that an item on the cultural audit of the organisation should be added to a forthcoming agenda.
- It was suggested that an update on various initiatives in relation to the harassment of women and girls should be added to a future agenda.

Membership of the budget sub-group was confirmed. It was also confirmed that:

- A budget briefing would be held via Teams on 5 December at 10am.
- The Panel's next meeting would be held on 19 January at 11am.

The meeting ended at 3.43 pm

Chairman